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FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1500
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 4266
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 2078
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 1943
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY 2514
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0882
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 2860
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 001178

SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN BEGINS TO REDISCOVER CINEMA... AND
BUILDS MORE MARBLE BUILDINGS

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY. A former Soviet movie theater has reopened as the first dedicated, modern cinema in post-Independence Turkmenistan. Because of the wide availability of cheap pirated DVDs, video rental remains the most popular form of movie watching. Only a handful of people regularly attend the theater, but numbers are expected to rise now that summer has ended and word-of-mouth begins to spread. The director of the theater dreams of working in one of the large marble movie theaters being built through a government initiative designed to support cinema. However, he expressed deep concern over the financial viability and use-value of these new theaters, which will probably not even be able to procure movie reels. While cinema slowly gains popularity, most of the state-led construction is just a vanity project rather than a true initiative to promote the arts. END SUMMARY.

A WHOLE NEW WORLD

¶3. (SBU) In June 2008, the former Soviet movie theater "Mir" in the central part of Ashgabat reopened as the "Parahat" complex ("Parahat" is the Turkmen translation of "Mir", or "world"). The complex specializes in banquet halls for wedding celebrations, but a small side chamber houses the first dedicated movie theater to open in Turkmenistan since independence in 1991.

¶4. (SBU) Batyr, an ethnic Turkmen, is the operator and manager of the small theater, which seats a modest 50 people and features a modern surround sound system and big screen. The entrance fee is 20,000 manat (less than \$1.50), with showings almost every day at 7pm and 9pm. He acquires the latest movies from friends and contacts in Russia, who ship him the DVD's by airplane. In contrast to the existing 'movie theaters' in Ashgabat, which are really more like DVD cabs that play pirated discs, Batyr only buys licensed, professional Russian translations in high definition.

¶5. (SBU) So far, only a handful of people, most of them young couples, regularly go to the Parahat movie theater. After independence, cinemas around the country were shut

down. Today, movie rentals are hugely popular in Turkmenistan, especially in Ashgabat, but few express the desire to go to the cinema. Batyr predicts more and more people will start attending in September, both because of word-of-mouth publicity and people coming back from summer vacation.

PIRATES OF THE CASPIAN

¶6. (SBU) Pirated copies of the latest American movies are widely available almost immediately after their premiere in the West, while official translations take several months of work. Because of this, Batyr does not simply announce a schedule of films that will be playing in his theater, as many Turkmen would have no interest in seeing these movies again. Rather, moviegoers engage in a quasi-democratic voting process to choose the film of the evening. Because the culture of going to the movies has largely been lost in Turkmenistan, Batyr sees his job as "rekindling a love of cinema in the public." He also sees his small theater as a therapeutic escape for people to come relax after a hard day of work or study.

¶7. (SBU) He's also perhaps the most qualified person in the country for the job. In 1993, he became director of his first theater, which held a mere 25 people. Since then, he has operated three different theaters. His dream is to direct one of the massive cinemas being built as part of a nationwide initiative.

4D WHITE MARBLE THEATERS WITH BLANK SCREENS

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¶8. (SBU) Turkmenistan's Government is pouring money into several new theaters, with the flagship theater just 500 meters away from Parahat. Along with "4D" capability, it is expected to seat 400-500. Batyr remains skeptical of its viability. (NOTE: 4D is interactive technology - such as seats that shake, etc. - that is built into the theater. END NOTE.) "What are they going to show there? A movie reel costs \$100,000 -- who's going to pay that kind of money? You can't play DVD's on a big screen designed for 500 people." He plans to pay a visit to the directors of the bigger theater and question them on how they plan to acquire movies.

¶9. (SBU) COMMENT. Going to the movies seems to be slowly reemerging as a pastime for Turkmen youth and has the potential to develop into a significant source of social networking and community building. However, cheap and widely available pirated DVD's ensure that the majority of Turkmen will continue to watch movies at home. And while the Government is certainly willing to build grandiose theaters to promote cinema, practical questions regarding what to show and how to make these theaters financially viable suggest that the construction is just a vanity project rather than a true initiative to promote the arts. END COMMENT.
CURRAN